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‘I Know the Power of Head Start’: Laid-Off Worker Fears for the Program’s Future



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By Daisy Nguyen  Apr 16

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Birdie Winrow in San Leandro on April 14, 2025. Head Start programs worry that the closure of a federal office in San Francisco could create delays in getting funding requests approved — and weaken their support system. (Martin do Nascimento/KQED)

Birdie Winrow was on the verge of buying a home when the [Trump](#) administration began firing federal workers as part of its push to downsize the government.

Winrow, 48, had only been working at the Office of Head Start's regional office in San Francisco for a month. Although she was spared in the first round of cuts, she sensed that more were on the way, prompting her to walk away from what she described as a sweet deal. The owner was willing to sell her the house in the East Bay city of Antioch below the asking price.

"I had been saving for three years to get to this point to buy a house, and so I was really sad about it," she said.

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It was a devastating loss for Winrow. The house would've been a dream realized through hard work, and with the help of Head Start.

She first heard about the federal program nearly 30 years ago, when she was a 19-year-old mom raising two kids in San Francisco. She relied on government assistance programs to get by but was ready to get off welfare and move on with her life. So she enrolled her 3-year-old son at a Head Start center in the Bayview-Hunter's Point neighborhood so she could look for a job.



Birdie Winrow in San Leandro on April 14, 2025. (Martin do Nascimento/KQED)

A worker at the Head Start center told Winrow her son had to undergo a dental exam as part of the enrollment process. That prompted Winrow to take her son to his first dental checkup and to improve her parenting skills.

"That was a really profound moment in my teenage mom life to say, 'Oh, I need to actually brush my baby's teeth every day, and I have to take him to the dentist,'" she said. "That was my beginning of loving Head Start."

Child care enabled her to pursue work at the San Francisco school district and a drug rehab center. She went on to have two more children, earned college and graduate degrees in human services and human development and established a career in social work and early childhood education.



► [Local Head Start Program Scrambles to Keep Supporting Kids Amid Trump's Funding Freezes](#)

She also came back to Head Start to work in various roles, from teacher to manager of several programs in the East Bay.

She said her story is proof that Head Start works.

The federal program was founded 60 years ago to help America's poorest families break the cycle of poverty by delivering meals, developmental screenings, and an early education for children from birth to 5 years old while helping their parents pursue financial security.

"I know the power of Head Start because I used the tools that Head Start gave me to be who I am today and have all of these opportunities that I've had," she said.

Winrow said she took the job at the regional office because she wanted to make a bigger impact by serving as a federal liaison to local Head Start programs in California, Arizona, Nevada, Hawaii and U.S. territories in the Pacific.

But on April 1, she abruptly lost her job when the Department of Health and Human Services shuttered half of its regional offices.



Children ride bicycles in the playground at a Head Start program in American Canyon, California, on Feb. 13, 2025. (Beth LaBerge/KQED)

Laurie Todd-Smith, deputy assistant secretary for Early Childhood Development at HHS, told Head Start providers by email that the government was consolidating 10 regional offices into five to save taxpayers' money and that the move "will serve multiple goals without impacting critical services."

However, Head Start providers, some of whom [had problems accessing their funding after Trump took office](#), are worried the elimination of the regional offices will delay the release of funds and hinder their ability to serve children and families.

"That's very worrisome, in particular to our small nonprofits who by law, cannot keep a lot of cash on hand and by their nature, don't have a cash flow," said Ed Condon, executive director of the Region 9 Head Start Association, which represents 160 agencies serving more than 130,000 Head Start children and families in the western U.S.

These nonprofits risk not being able to pay their staff or rent on time, he said.



The Oakland Head Start mobile classroom at Lincoln Square Park in Oakland on Friday, May 24, 2024. Last year, the city of Oakland introduced its "Ready, Set, Go" vehicle, an RV converted into a Head Start classroom, which travels to homeless shelters, providing educational and social services to families experiencing housing instability. (Gina Castro/KQED)

Firing workers at these regional offices eliminates expertise that took decades to build up, he said.

Head Start providers have yet to receive a transition plan laying out who they should turn to for support. The email sent by Todd-Smith instructed them to submit urgent questions to an online system that the Office of Head Start staff would monitor.

In all, staffing at the Administration of Children and Families, which oversees Head Start and other childcare and child welfare programs, dropped by 40% in just three months, according to a memo by former ACF staffers.

They're concerned the cuts are part of a bigger plan to get rid of Head Start, as outlined in Project 2025, a conservative policy blueprint led by Russel Vought, who Trump appointed to run the White House Office of Management and Budget.



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At the San Francisco regional office, Winrow reviewed grant applications to ensure local agencies were meeting Head Start's quality standards.

She said her experiences at Head Start helped her understand the importance of targeting funds to serve the most vulnerable families, whether they're experiencing homelessness or have a child with developmental delays.

"Federal workers are needed because they are directly connected to the recipients who serve our low-income families," she said.

Besides the personal loss of her job and the home she hoped to buy, Winrow is concerned the latest cuts will weaken a program that has done so much for her and her family.

Six of her grandkids have gone through Head Start too.

She wonders if the children who come behind them will get the same benefits.

"I'm a living example of why Head Start matters and why Head Start is important — not only because I worked there, but a lot of times Head Start people ... start off maybe as a child or they may start off as a parent, but in the end they give back," she said.

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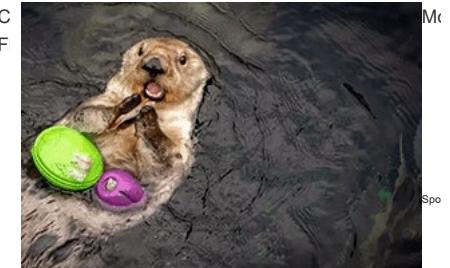
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